

CHAPTER 3

CREATING INSTRUCTIONAL UNITS

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The term “units” is one that teachers use loosely. “I’ve just finished a unit on writing poetry,” says Teacher A, who has spent a week having students read and write poetry in many different forms. “I’m about to start my popular culture unit,” says Teacher B, who will spend the next eight weeks having her students explore mass media. “I’m falling behind in my unit on intolerance,” says Teacher C, who is halfway through reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*.

An instructional unit can range from a few days of concentrated study to an entire course. Some teachers may have several units going at once: a Fridays-only writing unit, taught along with a Monday-Wednesday literature unit, while a Thursdays-only free reading unit is in progress.

In this chapter we use the term “unit” to mean all of the above, consistent with popular usage. A unit, then, is simply an organized block of instruction. However, we place particular emphasis on units that extend over a period of time—from a few weeks to a month or more. In general, it is fairly easy to put together short units where the end is in sight right from the beginning. By contrast, teachers often have difficulty planning and sustaining experiences for their students working over a period of many weeks or several months. If a unit is not carefully structured, it can degenerate into a string of loosely related activities, and, to borrow from Shakespeare, “Tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow, creeps in this petty pace from day to day.”

Of course, there are some very good reasons for keeping a unit flexible, not planning it so tightly that there is no opportunity to change course or direction. If teachers are responsive to the needs, interests, and abilities of the students, some of the outcomes of an instructional unit will emerge as students react to the material. In the

course of reading a novel such as Peter Dickinson's *A Bone from Dry Sea*, students may become fascinated by scientific ideas such as the sea-ape theory or the beginnings of human reason, in which case the teacher may want to schedule library time so that students can find information they will share orally or in writing. Still, it is one thing to individualize by providing options for students *within* a well-designed unit framework and quite another to teach from day to day with no real sense of direction. This chapter presents a pattern for planning units—whether a ten-day “mini-unit” or a full-term course—that allows for careful, comprehensive design, yet still allows room for meeting individual needs. Much of unit building depends on the teacher and his or her individual style and values. You must discover patterns of organization and activity that are comfortable for you while still being productive for your students.

It is also important to state two axioms about unit building:

1. A good instructional unit will be based on careful assessment of students' needs and interests. This may seem self-evident to the reader, but we have witnessed (alas, sometimes in our own classes) students plodding through ingeniously designed units that simply do not make connections. In some cases the failure grows from inappropriate content (e.g., a unit on eighteenth-century British poetry for a class of general ability juniors); in others it may simply be a result of expecting too much (e.g., the formal, footnoted research paper for seventh graders).

2. A good instructional unit will be consistent with the teacher's articulated philosophy of the discipline and of instruction and be in line with what is considered to be best practice. That is, a unit should reflect the teacher's absolute conviction that this work is something valuable for students to know, and it should further reflect his or her understanding of how young people go about learning in and through language. It is with this second axiom that prepackaged units, whether in textbook or school curriculum guide, may cause problems, and the teacher needs to make some careful decisions before teaching from or adapting such materials.

TOPICS AND STRUCTURES FOR UNITS

An instructional unit can be created on almost any topic in the known, or for that matter *unknown* universe. In secondary English programs, units have traditionally been centered on the following:

Literary history—covering periods in British, American, and world literature.

Literary genre—focusing on a particular kind of literature: poetry, short story, the novel, or a subgenre such as science fiction.

Literary theme—with an emphasis on driving ideas that are common to a number of works.

Elements of language and composition—ranging from “grammar” to “personal writing” to “analyzing public doublespeak.”

While it is possible that very good units could be built using any of these organizing principles, each kind places some limitations on the concepts and materials that a

teacher can naturally introduce, and it is useful to consider these limitations. For example, in a literary history unit, matters that go outside historical interest are often ignored or introduced accidentally, and literature is presented from a single point of view: its location in a chronological parade. Similarly, genre units run the risk of becoming "self-centered," dealing only with the elements of a single genre: the rhyme and meter of the poem, for example, or plot and character in the short story. Language and composition units may be taught in isolation from literature (or language in use) and sometimes treat language fragmentarily rather than as an organic whole.

Of the four organizing patterns, we prefer the *thematic* or *topical* unit more commonly used in elementary and middle schools, but quite viable in senior high as well. This pattern, like the other three, can foster its own kind of blindness to some aspects of teaching. For example, "theme" may be taken to mean exclusively literary themes or recurring motifs: "courage," "identity," the "westward movement." If literary theme is the sole concern, the thematic unit, like a genre unit, may become self-centered, with the theme providing the central quest and teachers and students looking for little beyond it. Thus, once the students find a reference to "innocence" or "experience" or "love and hate," they conclude they have correctly solved the puzzle of a particular piece of literature.

We like to treat the concept of theme or topic very broadly, so thematic units take on a wide range of issues. Perhaps most important, a broadly selected theme invites integration of students' personal experiences and interests, their oral language, their reading, their knowledge of disciplines beyond English, their writing, and even their understanding of literary history and genre. A good thematic unit will offer a variety of writing, reading, research, and speaking activities without unduly limiting kinds of materials or methods of response.

As Figure 3.1 shows, units can center on topics as diverse as Growing Up and Fairy Tales and Fables. They can include authors (R.L. Stine Meets Stephen King), literary topics (Narrative as a Way of Knowing), and social issues (Separation and Loss).

We are particularly convinced of their usefulness because of three advantageous characteristics of thematic/topical units.

1. *They accommodate a wide range of literary and other linguistic materials.* Not limited to any genre or in many cases to any era or national literature, a thematic unit can contain poetry, prose, drama, and nonfiction that ranges over a spectrum of literature from classic to contemporary, from all areas of the globe, from highly accessible reading to that which challenges the most able. Further, thematic units invite the use of language in various forms, including films, videotapes, television programs, talk, conversation, speech, and drama. In a unit on "Violence In America" students would certainly explore the theme of violence in literature, but they could just as easily make a study of contemporary television programming and what's happening on the Internet. They might look at violence in literature reflecting various cultures, or they might compare some of the eyeball-spearing classics to violent books from their own time to reflect on similarities and differences.

2. *They are naturally interdisciplinary.* A unit on "Independence—Why is This Drive so Strong and What Gets In Its Way?" can easily include: psychology (how do humans become independent psychologically and developmentally?); history (what

Loneliness and Alienation	Self-improvement
American Folklore	Afterlife
Science Fact/Fiction	Accepting Oneself
Education	Duty
Families	Fairy Tales and Fables
Relationships	Mythology
Growing Up	Creating Communities
Neighborhoods	Freedom
Brothers and Sisters	Independence
Bonding	Maturity and Mortality
Worry and Anxiety	The Voice of the People
Separation and Loss	Differences
Emotions	Successes
Violence and/or War	Work
Inner Conflicts	People in Crisis
Friends	Getting It Together
Beliefs	Discovery
Survival	Learning from Nature
The Environment	Intolerance
Addictions	Importance of Animals
Sports	Understanding Others
Thoreau and Gary Paulsen	R.L. Stine Meets Stephen King
Chris Crutcher and Emily Dickinson	Narrative as a Way of Knowing
Dreams and Goals	Rites of Passage
Disillusionment	Finding Love

Figure 3.1 Topics for Thematic Units

have people been willing to put on the line for independence?); economics (how does the economy and resource base of a country affect its ability to be independent?); science (compare humans' and mammals' drive to be independent and self-sufficient. What can we learn from the animal kingdom?); art (when did American art come into its own, independent of Europe? How is the theme of independence represented in art?); vocational education (what people skills are needed to be independent enough to get and keep a job?); futuristics ("Is it possible to create a society which could produce everything it needs?").

3. *They allow a natural integration of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.* The traditional unit often isolates the components of the English language arts: literature is studied alone; language is treated by itself; writing is separated from both. Thematic and topical units, by contrast, invite students to apply all the language arts to the topic at hand. One day they write or talk about it; the next day they read or listen.

It should be noted, too, that thematic/topical units can often be worked into courses or curricula that have been structured along other lines. For example, within a chronological American literature course, a teacher may subdivide to create topical clusters of readings: "American Identity," "Dreams and Goals," "Rites of Passage." Recognizing this flexibility, some textbook publishers provide alternative tables of contents for their books, showing how an anthology can be used to teach by theme, genre, or chronology. If your textbook lacks such helpful apparatus, you can do the same thing by looking for literature that flows together in a thematic pattern. Even composition courses can be structured by themes, often beginning with units on personal experience and moving toward social or academic issues and problems.

We do not wish to oversell the thematic/topical approach, for there are drawbacks and abuses. If a thematic approach is used simply to teach in a top-down manner with the teacher positioned as the giver of all "answers," then rearranging the material into themes will not utilize the strengths of the approach. The point is to find ways to organize and use material that give you the broadest options of approaches and assignments. By removing the restrictions the other kinds of unit organizations imply, you can bring in more material that will interest students and create a wide variety of ways for students to become engaged in the unit and to respond to the material. Thematic units are meant to open the door to possibilities, to nudge both teachers and students in new directions in their reaction and response, not to narrow the ways they can write or respond.

We acknowledge that misuses are possible with thematic units but there are, of course, solutions to each of those problems (we invite you to consider the Explorations that conclude this chapter). However, it is important to distinguish between practical or applied abuses and the theoretical power of an approach. No method—genre, chronology, language, or themes—should be rejected solely because some teachers abuse it; probably any style of teaching can be turned into a parody of itself through excess. The critical question is which approach (or combination of approaches) can offer students the greatest access to language; for us, the answer to that question is largely by teaching in a thematic way.

What follows, however, applies to any approach to unit development and should help teachers who value a variety of patterns of organization in creating well-organized units. We'll discuss this in five stages as shown in Figure 3.2.

SELECTING A FOCUS AND SETTING OBJECTIVES

We all like things to come in neat little packages. We don't like loose ends sticking out. We want order and harmony. But unit creating cannot start from the premise that everything is linear and that we all go from point A to point B. The purpose of constructing a unit is to find ways students can connect to the material and to find ways to help students make sense of their world as they grow in levels of literacy. Permeating this ideology is the belief in the importance of student input, student discovery, and student response. A unit is not a prepackaged set of materials. It is not meant as a structure that puts students "through their paces."

We have found it helpful when imagining a unit to begin with a "big question" or idea and to state in writing for ourselves what we would like our students to try to

SELECTING A FOCUS AND SETTING OBJECTIVES

What do you envision your students exploring or finding out? What do you want your students to learn or accomplish?

CHOOSING MATERIALS

What can you build the unit around? What other materials and resources can you include?

STRUCTURING THE UNIT

How will you start the unit? What activities will you include? What kind of management structures will you use?

ORCHESTRATING ACTIVITIES

How will you organize classroom activities?

EVALUATING AND ASSESSING

How will students demonstrate their learning?

How will you know the unit has been effective?

Figure 3.2 Creating a Unit

discover or answer or explore. We follow this by working to articulate why this unit is important and what it has to do with our students. If we don't know why a unit can be important and how it can be connected to student lives and interests, students certainly won't see the point of what we're doing. The next step involves brainstorming and writing down any ideas that come to you, any writing connections, questions, material, or issues that can be built on. If you find through brainstorming that this "overriding question" has lots and lots of pieces and parts, then it will probably be rich enough to engage the class. If you run into blocks and dead ends, then you'll probably want to rethink your idea for a unit.

Next, make a list of possible activities that will involve students. If you see ways to incorporate such things as interviews and small group work and projects and writing assignments, then you can see that this unit is full of possibilities and will likely involve students.

Write down the language arts skills that will be emphasized through work on this unit. Will you focus on having students understand memoir and learn to write descriptively in that genre? Will you ask students to understand the elements in a fable and be able to write one? Will you work with students on improving their ability to use dialogue in their stories?

The setting of goals or objectives has been a subject of considerable debate ever since the publication of Robert F. Mager's *Preparing Instructional Objectives* in 1962. Mager objected, rightly, that many teachers phrase their goals fuzzily, and valid criticism has been directed toward English teachers because of their failure to make objectives explicit.

"I want my students to appreciate literature," says the English teacher.

"What do you mean appreciate?" asks a skeptic. "How will I know that your students 'appreciate?'"

Although some English language arts teachers may hide behind the vagueness of a word like "appreciate," part of the problem may be in terms of language; it's not that teachers don't know what they're doing, it's simply that it is difficult to get it into words.

What can students who appreciate literature do? Here are some possibilities:

- They might be able to choose from among many works some that they find particularly satisfying.
- They will certainly be able to express their reactions to literature orally or in writing.
- They will probably do some reading on their own beyond that required in school.
- They may even become frequent library users or book buyers

So even something as seemingly vague as "appreciation" can be broken down into observable processes and skills. There is a danger, of course, of fragmenting a global skill—appreciation—by trying to specify its component behaviors too tightly; many of Mager's followers made that error when they tried to apply the behavioral objective in English. Although one can identify a number of discrete skills mastered by a good reader—who may, for example, respond to metaphors in a text—it is not necessarily appropriate for the teacher to turn around and teach that skill directly: "The student will be able to identify eight of ten metaphors in a passage from literature."

A way out of the dilemma of specificity may be to worry less about the exact form of the objectives than about their rationale and their theoretical underpinning. The lack of focus that concerns many critics of education results not from lack of a proper statement but from failure to develop a rationale for teaching. Perhaps the question should not be "What is appreciation?" A better one might be "Why are you teaching something called 'literary appreciation' in the first place?" That seems to us a valid and important question, especially in an age dominated by media and a powerful national will to succeed in the "practical" domains of business and industry.

Any objective needs to be clearly justifiable in terms of the following questions:

Is this objective consistent with what we know about the nature of the learning process and the aims of schooling?

Is there any evidence from research or critically examined experience that having students do this will actually help them use language more successfully?

Is this goal consistent with the developmental levels of the learner?

Is it based on real expectations (i.e. what we know students do) rather than on wishful expectations (what we think students "ought" to do)?

If these criteria are met, the objective can be described in a number of ways:

As skills or processes that the students will master during the unit.

As course activities: what the students will read, talk about, write on, or experience.

As a set of "exit skills": activities the students will be able to perform after the course is over.

Objectives can be phrased as infinitives ("to learn," "to read," "to write") or imperatives ("you will _____"). They can also be written as aims for teachers, sketching out what is to be accomplished in a course. Some teachers we know write a "scenario" instead of a list of objectives, describing what they want to have happen in the "drama" of the forthcoming class. Others put their aims in epistolary mode, writing a plain English letter to parents and students outlining what will be happening in the course and why that's a good thing.

In themselves, objectives are a dime a dozen. Most of us can generate long lists of trivial to significant goals on any topic in English. Clearly stated objectives that mesh with current research and understanding of teaching are not so easily produced, because one is constantly thrust back to the real question, "Is this objective a worthy one?" See Figure 3.3 for samples of solid objectives.

CHOOSING MATERIALS

When we envision a unit, we like to start with a centerpiece, something to build the unit around. It may be a video, a short story, an audio tape, a piece of non-fiction, a novel, a TV show. The centerpiece is used as the focus and as a way to kick off the unit and get students involved.

Our second step is to make a mental inventory of what other materials can be used. Will children's picture books work? How about myths? Can you think of a movie or video that would work with the theme and contribute to the unit? How can poetry be worked in? non-fiction? music? art? The newer teacher does not have to figure this out alone but can ask other department members for possible resources. Once underway, students can also become sleuths, hunting for material that would work with the unit.

Too often the adopted textbook, rather than the teacher's own philosophy, sets the curriculum. Of course, the adoption of texts allows schools to believe that there is a degree of consistency in courses that are taught by a number of different teachers, that there is some continuity between grade levels. It also simplifies the selection of materials for teachers, and it cuts down on paper work in ordering books. Unfortunately, adopting textbooks creates a great many pedagogical problems.

For one thing, educational publishers see that the largest sums of money are to be made through getting series of books adopted by large systems. The effects of

Students will:

- Demonstrate their understanding of a genre by writing in that form (memoir, fairy tale, poem)
- Demonstrate their ability to use literary devices (such as foreshadowing and flashbacks) in their writing
- Demonstrate their ability to change a piece of writing from one format (such as a newspaper story) to another (such as a poem)
- Be able to explain how differing writing formats affect a piece of writing and its impact on the reader
- Demonstrate their ability to write effective, interesting pieces that engage their readers
- Demonstrate their ability to gather information on one topic from varied sources (interviews, Internet, non-fiction books, movies)
- Demonstrate in their writing the use of several strategies to develop character (use of dialogue, inner thoughts of character, emotional responses to a situation and so on)
- Demonstrate their ability to articulate ideas in small group settings
- Demonstrate their ability to gather information through interviewing others
- Demonstrate their ability to use spoken language to discuss, clarify, describe, evaluate and justify ideas
- Demonstrate their ability to hold the attention of their listeners when they are presenting orally
- Be able to compare their own views to an author's views and explain similarities and differences
- Be able to evaluate the effectiveness of a short story in terms of how believable characters are, how compelling the plot is and so on
- Demonstrate through writing, art, or drama how literature connects to their lives
- Demonstrate their ability to enter a story world by writing or drawing the scenes they "see"
- Be able to describe the differences in the styles of authors read
- Demonstrate their ability to shift perspectives in responding to literature by writing from a character's point of view

Figure 3.3 Sample Objectives

large-system adoptions—particularly the state adoptions in Texas and California—are notorious in educational circles. The massively adopted series are designed to satisfy large numbers of teachers and to be as inoffensive to as many people as possible. Thus they are often conservative in tone, reflecting not the best of current practice, but simply the practices of a majority.

Closer to home, adoption can be time consuming for a school staff and, once completed, it locks a school or district into a fixed curriculum for the period of time it takes the books to wear out. Nevertheless, most teachers do work from an adopted text, and in many schools it is the only resource provided to the teacher. We'll suggest two stages in working with the text in Figure 3.4.

1. Choose the best of a text. In most school districts, teachers have broad flexibility to select portions of the adopted text for teaching. The truly "lockstep" curriculum where everybody covers "Mending Wall" on the third Thursday of October is an anachronism or a myth. Your first step, then, in working with the adopted text is to survey it as you have the time, listing its resources that meet with your goals.

2. Supplement the text. Except for occasional problems with censorship, we've never seen a school district that objected to teachers using supplemental or enrichment materials. In selecting materials for your instructional unit, then, you will probably want to consider, in addition to the adopted texts:

- Community resources: speakers, consultants, guests
- Nonprint materials: films, filmstrips, videos, audio tapes
- Poetry that will complement the unit
- Children's picture books that look at the theme of the unit from a different point of view
- Fables, fairy tales, myths that might contribute to the unit
- Short stories from collections especially for young adults
- Non-fiction titles from the library that speak to the theme
- Clusters of four or five titles for small-group reading

Before putting something on a book list or a resource list, a teacher should ask:

- Does the material support the course or unit objectives?
- Do I have a rationale for its selection?
- Could some material required of all students be objectionable to special interest groups?
- Has the material been approved or recommended by a professional organization or listed on an established bibliography for young readers?

Figure 3.4 Working with and Supplementing the Text

We are believers in presenting students with a richness and variety of resources and materials, not to dazzle or confuse them, but to make the most of our possibilities as teachers for engaging students with language. As we'll show in this and subsequent chapters, the strict one-book, one-assignment approach in English need not be the norm any longer. For example, in a thematic unit on Family in which students look at what makes a family a family, poems, fairy tales, and picture books that show various kinds of families and different aspects of family life can be brought in. In collaborative groups students can look for views of family that appeal to them and talk and write about the positive or negative aspects of family that they find in those readings. They could read young adult novels like *Maniac Magee* by Jerry Spinelli, *The Watson's Go To Birmingham—1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis, *Deliver Us from Evie* by M.E. Kerr, *Spite Fences* by Trudy Krisher, or *Drummers of Jericho* by Carolyn Meyer. They could discuss

their novels in literature circles (see Chapter 7 for more information) focusing on strengths and weaknesses of the families portrayed. Students could listen to a school or family counselor talk about what children need from a family. The Internet or the non-fiction section of the library could garner more information on healthy and dysfunctional families, different family configurations, functioning in a stepfamily and so on. Collaborative group projects such as conducting a talk show on families can be one of the end-of-unit options.

STRUCTURING THE UNIT

In our unit creation we need to construct introductory activities and possible end-projects and assignments. In this bare-bones plan we also consider how we'll use different class groupings and on what we'll assess students. Although we like to have a long-range plan we realize the necessity of adapting or changing plans after we see the direction students want to go with the "big question." We also need to figure out what kind of modeling or instruction we need to include so all the students have the skills necessary to do what we would like them to do. Sometimes we might need to draft a script on the overhead together so students know the necessary conventions. Other times while working on effective beginnings of stories, we might construct multiple introductions on the overhead and discuss the impact of each type.

Once we have a sense of what we'll be doing, we look at the following kinds of management structures to see which will work best when.

Whole-class

Meeting the class as a whole is the time-honored mode of teaching. It allows the teacher to convey common content efficiently and to involve students in whole-class discussions. If handled well, this approach can create a sense of community. The obvious disadvantages of whole-class teaching are that it tends to force the teacher into a dominant role, it allows for relatively little student interaction, and it permits little time for students to work on their own. Steve seldom uses whole-class sessions for presentation of material, but Diana likes to use whole-class time to introduce core material and to pique the students' interest and to get them involved. Both of us use class meetings as show-and-tell sessions for presentation of students' work or to organize along the several patterns that follow.

Small Groups

A student in one of Steve's classes once remarked, "This is the 'groupinest' class I've ever been in." Both of us like to use groups, and we find them an effective middle ground between whole-class instruction and a totally individualized program. Groups usually involve a high degree of interaction among students, yet control is still maintained. The major disadvantages of small groups are that the teacher cannot always tell what is happening within them and that students don't always know how to work well in groups (a problem we will take up in another chapter).

Situating Workshops in a Unit Format

Increasingly, educators are combining these various ways of teaching under the rubric of the "workshop" approach which has students working in a variety of ways all at once. We have found that when you want to organize such structures as an extended writing workshop in your classroom, it works best to begin with a focus and with objectives.

Writing workshops can be focused around such things as point of view, voice, effective beginnings and endings, learning to write memoir, writing persuasively, learning a form such as satire or a stylistic device such as foreshadowing, writing about one's experiences in several different ways, creating an effective piece of writing that keeps reader interest. Objectives can include student demonstration of the ability to write from another point of view making diction and details effective. Another goal or objective could be to ask students to manage different forms of writing. This could be broken down into using logical sequencing in story writing, writing an original story within the framework of another story, using knowledge of one medium to develop a text in another medium, writing factual accounts in both first and third person, writing a narrative using dialogue, or writing a news story and a feature on the same topic. The students' objective could be to create a portfolio in which the writing is about themselves, but with at least three pieces written in different genres.

Whole units or mini-lessons can be constructed around the above focuses. Structuring a writing workshop unit need not be intimidating. You can begin by asking students to:

1. Read and examine works that illustrate the topic (for point of view you can have them read Paul Fleishman's *Seedfolks* (HarperCollins 1997), a collection of thirteen brief stories of people in New York and their relation to a vacant lot that they turned into a garden; for good beginnings, students can examine an array of picture books; for writing persuasively, editorials and letters to the editor can be used.)
2. Make generalizations based on the readings about the common elements in this kind of writing or naming the variations shown through the readings. (In *Seedfolks* students can list the similarities between the sections to see what kind of information the author chooses to represent a point of view).
3. Generate lists of what students learned about writing in this form or with this element. (From *Seedfolks* students have probably noticed that each person uses different kinds of words that reflect their backgrounds, that some use dialect, that vivid images of their lives are shared, that the author starts in different places in the slices of life he shares, that the characters' connection to the vacant lot is always the focus of the piece, etc.)
4. Brainstorm topics or events students can write about with some authenticity, using the unit focus. (For point of view, students might brainstorm all the points of view from which an account of the death of a teen by a drunk driver could be written.)
5. Students select a topic using prewriting strategies such as clustering or listing and then write.

6. Papers are shared in small groups for reaction and response. Students also discuss whether the conventions or elements of this topic are present in the writing. (Does the word choice seem appropriate for this person, are the details concrete enough so the reader learns about the character?)

7. As a class, create rubrics which will be used to assess the pieces.

8. Revise papers.

9. Present to a broader audience.

10. Encourage metacognition by asking students to reflect on strategies used to write the piece, what worked, what didn't, and so on.

The major difference between the writing workshop unit and any other is that there is generally less emphasis on selecting materials, since they are often only used to kick the unit off and as the basis of mini-lessons to teach a specific concept or skill.

When organizing an experiential or inquiry-based approach it also works well to begin with objectives and with what you want your students to do or demonstrate, since many of them will be working with different materials. Some objectives might include: to research a topic or some aspect of a topic that the student is interested in; to have students broaden their view of research and see that information can be gained through interviews, the Internet, and surveys as well as through observation and reading books, magazines, and newspapers. Another objective is to have students describe the "process" of the journey to find information, explaining what avenues of research were fruitful and which were not. With their research students can "publish" by videotaping some aspect of it, writing a pamphlet, or making an oral report to the class. Each of those end-products contain many, many sub skills which may also be used.

Individual or Independent Work

Involving individual students in their schooling in a meaningful way has long been a goal in education, one complicated by the economic necessity of clustering students in groups of thirty or more for efficiency. It's difficult to find ways to meet all students at their interest and need levels when English teachers have at least 5 classes and 150 students. However, if students have some choice about selections and also have a variety of appealing writing assignments, the teacher has made a good start toward individualizing. Time can be set aside in class for students to work individually on such tasks as composing, researching, and reading.

Individualization can, of course, be taken too far if students work in isolation and never come together to share and discuss what they have done. Some schools in the 1970s developed programs based so heavily on individualized study that both students and teachers became downright lonely. Although individual study may be important, education seems to require the sharing of ideas and information as well.

Peer Learning and Tutoring

Jean Jacques Rousseau's educational ideal was an adult working one-to-one with a child. Contemporary educators have discovered that face-to-face learning need not always involve an adult, that young people of almost any age have much to learn from

one another. Babies who have older brothers and sisters learn to talk more rapidly than those who don't. Why? Because the older siblings interact with the baby and help the infant to learn to talk. In elementary school classes, peer learning can be used in everything from spelling to reading. In the secondary schools peers can edit each other's papers, pair up to generate ideas related to literature, and work through more difficult assignments together. We are just beginning to understand how peer learning works; it is an area that deserves exploration and experimentation in English classes.

Contracts

This form of organizing individualized classes, contracts, require that the teacher and student agree on an amount of work to be done by the student to receive a certain grade. Quality controls are built into the contract so that students must do more than produce rote work on assignments or breeze through the reading and writing work mindlessly. In some schools, projects have point values assigned—e.g. 10 points for a book report, 15 points for an essay—with grades depending on point accumulation. Contracting sometimes has the effect of generating work simply for its own sake—the more students do, the higher their grade—but handled cautiously, it allows teachers to control individualized work and manage it effectively in rather large classrooms. Further, contracting offers clearly defined structures and expectations for students who may get lost in a totally individualized classroom.

Resource Areas

English teachers often have students working on several activities and projects at one time. The classroom can have resource areas where students can find a wide selection of poetry; materials to complete projects; tape recorders so that student work can be shared; reference materials including dictionaries, thesauruses, and books on editing; shelves of books for browsing; and a table where students who need to plan a project can discuss their ideas. As teachers collect more resources on particular units such as science fiction they can also create resource areas that include supplementary readings, suggestions for writing, pictures and photographs as well as lists of recordings or videos available in the library.

ORCHESTRATING ACTIVITIES

Another area to consider as we plan a unit is classroom organization and the structure of the class. How much of this unit is teacher-directed and how much is student-centered? Can you see lots of opportunities for students to work in small groups on issues that will concern them? How will you organize class time? What will you expect your students to do each day? Orchestrating is creating a sequence both in the order of materials and the order of class structures you will use daily.

How objectives, materials, and structures are woven together to create a class is as much a matter of art and intuition as it is of science and rationality. As we orchestrate activities, we create a sequence that allows the course objectives to be met while providing a variable mix of activities for the students.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart claimed that there was a moment of inspiration when a symphony came to him all of one piece, where he could hear it from beginning to end. Few teachers will be fortunate enough to be able to visualize the orchestrations of a unit all at one moment (much less find the model students who will play that masterfully composed symphony precisely as written). Nevertheless, we often have an "aha" moment when the grand plan comes into mind:

"Yes, if I begin with poem X, then introduce short story Y, then send the kids off to the library for free reading, that will get the flow started so I can play the video of novel Z on Tuesday and Thursday and have their first writing due on Friday the umpteenth."

At other times orchestrating moves more slowly, and our desks and briefcases are filled with scraps of paper showing charts and diagrams and possibilities. In general, however, the patterns of orchestration for our teaching run along several sequences:

1. From large to small group. Initial class sessions describe the course or unit, stake out the class ground rules, clarify objectives, and provide some common experiences such as reading several stories or writing on a central or introductory topic.
2. From assigned work to individualized projects. We want our students to work toward exploring topics on their own terms and generating their own assignments for response and writing, so we move toward that goal by offering them lots of choices in assignments and encouraging them to create their own activities.
3. From small group or solo work back to large. At the conclusion of group or individualized work, students have ideas, projects, and writing to share. This sharing helps the class to operate as a cohesive group rather than as a collection of individuals or subgroups.

There are many other sequences that we recognize as part of our teaching, and perhaps you will find some of these familiar from your own teaching or learning:

From writing that draws directly on personal experience toward writing about acquired experience (either from the world or from reading).

From private response to public display or demonstration.

From contemporary literature, often very accessible, to older, more difficult pieces.

From shorter works to longer (the latter often read individually, with support from the teacher).

However, we can find examples of contrary movements in our teaching as well. There are times, for example, when we may begin with a complex work, one which requires our sponsorship or leadership, then move to "simpler" works (are any literary works truly "simple"?) which the students can handle on their own.

An example of one kind of orchestration is one Diana often used in her classes. The whole class reads a short story together. Then students write responses individually to the story mentioning the things that stand out for them in the story, the characters they relate to or dislike and so on. These responses are shared in a small

group which then collaboratively generates a list of themes they believe are present in the story or a list of values they think are present in the story. This work is shared with one other small group then each group reports to the whole class the themes and values they feel are most strongly present in the story. Class discussion/reaction follows. Based on the group work, writing/drawing/drama options are discussed and students individually or collaboratively choose an option to complete.

As a teacher/artist, you will certainly want to develop your own patterns, techniques, and strategies. It is important to note, however, that good art is seldom improvisational, random, or chance. There is science to our discipline, some widely accepted principles of good teaching, and they must underlie our artistry. Further, good teaching happens when we plan rather than improvise.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Our students only seem to take seriously what we assess or "count." Therefore it is important in your unit planning to decide how you will assess or evaluate student work. Will you develop a rubric for projects both oral and written? Will you have students write and reflect on what they have learned? Will you construct essay-like questions on skills you want to emphasize? Will you ask students to evaluate group work using such sentence starters as "My major contribution to the group was . . ." and "In our group, here's what we accomplished on our tasks . . ." How much will you assess through observation? More information will be given on evaluation and assessment in Chapter 13. Additionally we think it is helpful as you're planning a unit to reflect on whether or not the unit is in line with best practice in the field and whether or not it is consistent with your philosophy on the teaching of language arts. Does the plan for a unit integrate reading, viewing, writing, speaking, and listening? Are students expected to make meaning and relate this material to themselves or does the teacher control all the outcomes? Are the students being given a chance to raise real issues and answer questions that the teacher does not have the predetermined answers to?

EVALUATING UNIT PLANS

When we speak of best practice we are referring to strategies, plans, and assignments based on principles of active learning and what we know theoretically and practically about learning and involving students in their own learning. The list in Figure 3.5 includes a focus on best practice as well as on use of the language arts content standards. This check list is intended to help you, the practitioner, look at your own units and curriculum and find your areas of strength as well as those areas in which you would like to do more work.

We would like to end this chapter by presenting several detailed unit plans that illustrate the wide range of possibilities that exist for conceptualizing and creating units, including a unit that is built around student inquiry. We start with a unit built around a single short story (Figure 3.6) to demonstrate one way to build a unit around pieces in anthologies. Next we move to an experiential or inquiry-based unit (Figure 3.7) to illustrate how teachers can start with what students are interested in

To what extent does your current language arts curriculum and/or unit provide opportunities for students:

1. to actively construct meaning through their reading, writing, speaking, and viewing?
2. to work in small groups?
3. to have their thinking expanded or challenged?
4. to develop rubrics and criteria to apply to their own and others' work?
5. to have some choice in materials or formats of assignments?
6. to have their contributions viewed as an important part of the class?
7. to build on what they already know?
8. to read and work independently?
9. to look closely at and reflect on their own written work?
10. to engage in research and other projects that are authentic and can be presented publicly?
11. to read about a topic in several genres and construct a response to the reading?
12. to engage in authentic, real-life learning?
13. to be involved in activities that ask them to synthesize and/or apply what they have read about?
14. to be involved in a classroom that integrates speaking, listening, reading, and writing and puts all skills instruction back in context?
15. to receive writing instruction that is embedded in authentic activities and assignments and that focuses on the content of the writing?
16. to read widely both classic and contemporary works?
17. to learn vocabulary, including literary terms, in the context of the reading they are doing in class?
18. to read works by and about the diverse peoples who are part of this country?
19. to do daily writing in support of reading?
20. to think about the literature they are reading and make connections among the pieces they have read?

Figure 3.5 Evaluating Unit Plans

and how they can draw on the broad array of resources available outside the class. We end our unit plans with a thematic unit based on a typical author in American Literature and his work (Figure 3.8).

Our purpose in presenting this mix of units is to show the variety that exists in unit building and in unit topics. Although newer teachers often will not have an abundance of resources at their fingertips, our intention in illustrating how units can be built is to help you see unit possibilities in everything you hear or read or view. Thinking of unit building in this way makes it an exciting and provocative endeavor which can be a very satisfying and creative part of teaching.

Starting Small—Creating a Unit Around a Single Short Story

Instead of feeling overwhelmed by tackling a lengthy unit, one way to start out is by creating a thematic unit around a single short story. By “exploding” the story you can see how units can be created. This example is built around “Charles” by Shirley Jackson, which appears in many anthologies.

SELECTING A FOCUS AND SETTING OBJECTIVES.

This unit, “The Way We Were,” is intended for freshman at the beginning of the year so they have an opportunity to dig back into their memories of childhood and look at the way childhood is portrayed in literature. Objectives include involving students in responding to literature to show them how literature can be connected to their lives; involving students in writing narratives and at least one other genre; familiarizing students with how a different point of view could change a story; having students compare how childhood is viewed and portrayed in different kinds of literature; having students measure the “reality” or accuracy of the way childhood is portrayed by comparing it with their own life and experiences.

SELECTING MATERIALS.

The short story “Charles” by Shirley Jackson was chosen from the anthology because it quickly engages students in the antics of a kindergartner. The kindergarten years are a time in students’ lives they can remember, relate to, and talk about without feeling threatened by the topic. Children’s stories like “Little Red Riding Hood,” “Goldilocks,” and “Hansel and Gretel” will also be used. Stories in the newspaper about kids, TV shows that feature small children, and students’ stories of their own kindergarten experiences would also be shared and used.

STRUCTURING THE UNIT.

As an introductory activity we planned for students to do quick-writes on what they remembered about kindergarten. For individual student work we could envision students writing reactions and questions, developing writing options, choosing poems the main character would like, and bringing in and sharing newspaper stories about children or summaries of TV programs which featured young children. In groups, students would respond to each other’s work, share reactions and questions to the stories, and serve as peer editors for each other. In whole group we planned on reading the stories aloud, sharing memories, reporting what was talked about in groups, and sharing our end projects. For end projects we could imagine students adding additional scenes to the original story, writing pamphlets for parents on how to raise children, and role-playing how Laurie’s parents could have better responded to him.

(continued)

Figure 3.6 Short Story Unit

ORCHESTRATING ACTIVITIES.

After the quick-write and sharing in groups, "Charles" is read aloud. Students write about their own kindergarten memories, talk about what little kids are afraid of, how they got away with things like "Charles" did in the story, and how a story changes when told from a different point of view. Children's stories like "Little Red Riding Hood," "Goldilocks," and "Hansel and Gretel" were brought in and discussed in terms of what behavior and actions were attributed to children. Students talk about their favorite TV programs when they were small, toys they cherished, the way they dressed, and the games they played. Students look at themselves as children and also looked at how childhood is portrayed. The writing connections pop up everywhere. Students write letters to the main character's parents to tell them to be firmer and not believe everything that Laurie told them, they write to the parents from the teacher's point of view, and they do interior monologues from Laurie's point of view as he was making up the "stories" he told his parents.

Students compare the rather pampered way the kindergartner was treated by his parents in "Charles" to the way they see children characterized in other texts. They talk about lessons young children learn from the stories they read, the movies they see, and the way their parents treat them. Projects at the end of the unit include scripts of scenes students add to the story, pamphlets advising parents on how best to deal with kindergartners, presentations on what fairy tales teach children, and videos of children playing games with a voice-over of what lessons and values each game teaches children. Once the unit starts and students get involved, the activities flow from one to the other, going from large group to small group to individual work to group work and then back again to the whole-class.

EVALUATING AND ASSESSING.

Since students have an aversion to anything they feel they won't get credit for, assessment is discussed with them. It is important that they understand that group work is an essential part of class since much of the material of the class is generated from groups. Students learn that they would either write a response to each group they participated in or the teacher would give them credit through her observation of the group. Since the talk they share in the large group is also a big part of their meaning-making, the teacher rotates the responsibility each day for keeping track of who made contributions so students can get credit for all the discussions. This can be varied by asking students to complete a few sentence-starters at the end of class such as: I did/did not participate today because. . . ; I wished I had said. . . ; I learned from the discussion today that. . .

Of course, written pieces are workshopped, responded to, revised, and put in a classroom booklet entitled Kindergarten Memories. After reading many of these stories from other classes, students create rubrics which guide the evaluation. Final presentations also are evaluated through the use of rubrics. All presentations are videotaped and students have input into which ones become part of the classroom video library.

Figure 3.6

Developing an Experiential or Inquiry-Based Unit Around Classroom Concerns

Inquiry-based and experiential approaches have as their foundation student interest and input as well as students acting in the role of expert—measuring what they are learning against their own experience.

SELECTING A FOCUS AND SETTING OBJECTIVES

When we saw too many of our urban ninth graders get in fights or verbal shouting matches over perceived signs of “disrespect,” we decided to confront the problem head-on by developing a unit on respect. Our question was: “What does respect really mean and how do people handle it when they don’t get the respect they think they should?” Through this short unit we hoped that students would at least begin to think about their actions and what they meant and perhaps develop other ways to handle people they felt disrespected them.

After brainstorming with students we could see that this topic was chockfull of issues. Students wondered: Why do some kids see respect as so much more important than other kids? How do we get true respect? Does our drive for respect cause us to do things that we don’t want to do? Is this true respect? Who do we respect? What did that person do to gain our respect? What’s going on beneath these incidents of “calling someone out of their name”? Are there other ways to handle incidents of perceived disrespect? What can we learn from others about settling disagreements?

When we considered the language arts skills students would use in this unit, many jumped to mind. In literature we would do such things as compare the structures of the genres used looking for similarities and differences between them, compare our views of respect to the authors, and evaluate the short stories in terms of how realistic the characterization was and how believable the actions were in terms of students’ own experience.

SELECTING MATERIALS

We could see that we had plenty of material to start with. We selected a chapter from Nathan McCall’s *Makes Me Want to Holler* (Random House, 1994) called “Respect” as the centerpiece. As a kid growing up, the author felt the way many of our students felt, that all they had was their name and that they became less if others disrespected them. McCall’s chapter is tough and tells it like it is. Since the chapter stops without much reflection on the author’s part, we skipped ahead in the book to find passages we could read that would show how he had reconsidered his position on respect as he got older. We also brought in Aretha Franklin’s recording “R-E-S-P-E-C-T” to look at how she viewed respect, and two short stories “On the Bridge” by Todd Strasser in *Visions*, edited by Don Gallo, and “Fourth of July” by Robin G. Brancato in *Sixteen*, edited by Don Gallo.

(continued)

Figure 3.7 Inquiry-based Unit

STRUCTURING THE UNIT.

Activities that seemed to fit the theme were interviews of older people and peers, skits, talk show dramas, writing a narrative on the topic, finding poems on the issues, writing an expository piece on getting respect, writing an editorial on why this issue is so important to teens and how adults can help, options to verbal and physical battles, small group discussions on getting respect, having the assistant principal for discipline share her insights on kids who fight for respect, having a member of Peer Assisted Listening (PAL) talk about and demonstrate approaches to mediation, and writing up class activities into a newspaper on the topic.

Besides the materials already mentioned, we also thought we could work discussions of TV shows into the unit to see what models TV offered for getting respect. We would also invite students to go on a children's picture book hunt for books that give younger children advice on the topic of settling disputes. We knew we could count on our students to give us titles of movie or video possibilities and to suggest songs that dealt with disrespect.

When we looked at what we were expecting of our students we decided that work would have to be done on using dialogue, what vivid details look like in writing, why word pictures are important to readers, how to construct interview questions, how to conduct an interview, how to effectively write an expository piece, and what goes into writing an editorial. This modeling or instructional part of the unit could be done with the whole class, using the overhead projector and having students contribute their ideas. For instance, we could construct dialogues on the overhead, paying attention not only to the format, but to what makes a dialogue interesting. When we looked for vivid details, we could put up several sentences from past student writing and have students identify which sentences create pictures in their minds. We would learn to construct interview questions by first generating questions that would give the interviewer little information and then move to learning to construct more open-ended questions.

We decided that the short stories and the chapter from Nathan McCall's book would be read aloud. Small groups could focus on specific tasks from topics in the stories, be used to create a survey to give to fellow students, and to generate questions for interviews on the topic of respect. We wanted to leave lots of room for whole-class discussions.

ORCHESTRATING ACTIVITIES.

To begin the unit, we would start in a very simple way by having students write on a large note card their definition of what respect means, how to get respect, how you know you aren't being respected, and possible ways to handle a show of disrespect. Students would not put their names on the cards, so we could collect them, shuffle them, hand out the cards to small groups. The groups would read the cards they received and then write a list of what they learned from the cards. This introductory activity would give us lots of information and raise even more interest in the topic. When we considered end projects we looked at some of the activities and decided to create end-products around them. We wanted to give

(continued)

Figure 3.7

students the opportunity to construct a pamphlet on what the older generation has to say about respect and one on what their peers have to say about it. Others could do a newspaper whose articles focused on what we found out about the topic as well as stories on guest speakers. We also envisioned a talk show presentation in which students role-played specific points of view on the topic. We knew other projects would emerge as we became involved in the unit.

EVALUATING AND ASSESSING

As we thought about assessment we knew we would do much of it as we worked our way through the unit. We would ask students to explain and compare Nathan McColl's definition of respect to the definitions the main characters in the short stories had and to their own. We would grade these on how well each definition was explained and whether or not examples were used, looking for evidence that students understood how to compare the different definitions.

For group work we would give out a sheet of paper that had a circle on it, telling students to divide the circle or pie into pieces according to who contributed the most to the group that day. They would have to explain their reasons for dividing the pie the way they did.

We also wanted to be sure students measured their experiences with respect against what they were researching and learning. We asked them to write reflective papers or incorporate their "expertness" into their projects.

Since all of the end products were to be presented in public ways (the pamphlet, the newspaper, the talk show) we would create a rubric that would include the presentation as well as the content. For instance, we would include an item (to be responded to by: 1] not at all; 2] a little; 3] a lot; or 4] a great deal) such as "It was obvious from the way the (newspaper, pamphlet, the talk show) was put together that a large amount of time was spent on this project." Another item would be "The project was composed in such a way that readers or viewers gained new insights or information."

EVALUATING THE UNIT

In reflecting on what elements of best practice were embedded in the unit, we could immediately see that the language arts were integrated, that students would be actively constructing meaning through their work, that the skills were being taught in the larger context of the unit, and that students were engaged in authentic, real-life learning. Students would also have a choice about which aspect of respect they worked on.

Students would be writing in many formats and genres and focus on such things as the use of dialogue, the selection of details to make an impact on the reader, use of persuasion, and how each piece was organized. Thinking, writing, speaking, and listening skills would be combined through creating interview questions and interviewing an older person, sharing responses, and drawing conclusions about what the younger generation can learn from the older generation about respect. Speaking and problem solving would be emphasized when we role-played after hearing the PAL demonstrations on conflict mediation.

Figure 3.7

Creating a Thematic Unit in American Literature

Although most teachers have some kind of anthology they can or should use, this use need not stop them from creating units using only some of the material from the anthology. Plodding through a textbook, moving from story to story, doesn't usually give students the idea that the work in the language arts class is in anyway related to them. Once you know what is in the American Literature anthology, you can feel free to develop units that focus on involving your students instead of focusing so much on the history and characteristics of different literary movements. Diana developed and used the following unit in her American Literature classes. Here are some of her first-person notes written after the unit.

SELECTING A FOCUS AND SETTING OBJECTIVES.

Henry David Thoreau has always interested me because I constantly learn from his writings. To really get my kids involved with Thoreau, I wanted them to see why he valued individualism. I wanted them to look deeper into the world and recognize the part nature can play in our learning and in our nourishment. Since high school is such a stressful time for students I wanted them to get some perspective on what else might be important in life. Thus, this unit was framed around the question: "Does Thoreau Have Anything to Teach Modern Humankind?"

SELECTING MATERIALS.

I started with the play *The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail* by Robert Lee. The class also read selections from his journals which I felt free to shorten. I brought in a newspaper article which told of a superintendent who fired a teacher because he refused to conform to the faculty dress code. The last text we used was Gary Paulsen's *Woodsong* (Scholastic 1990), the story of his relationships with his sled dogs and his running of the Iditarod in Alaska.

STRUCTURING THE UNIT AND ORCHESTRATING ACTIVITIES.

As we got close to beginning the unit, I asked my students to spend five to ten minutes under the stars by themselves, trying to clear their minds. When they came in they were to write what they experienced by focusing on the stars. The students who did the solitary viewing were very philosophical. This assignment led us to a discussion of what, if anything, we can learn from nature. Then they were ready to meet Henry David himself. We read the play aloud in class. Through this play they saw Thoreau in action, saw what a rebel he was and how he questioned everything in his search for the "essentials" of life.

After reacting to the play and to Thoreau's actions, students were ready to read excerpts from *Walden*. In their response journals I asked my students to find ten sentences or concepts in the selections from *Walden* that they either strongly agreed with or vehemently disagreed with and to explain why. I typed up a list of lines from parts of his work that weren't part of the reading assigned, and asked students to explain what the quotes meant and whether or not they agreed with them. Then I asked them to rank the fifteen quotes from most important to them personally, to least important. In small group discussions they shared their views, trying to persuade others to share their rankings.

(continued)

Figure 3.8 American Literature Thematic Unit

My students believed the action of the superintendent in the newspaper article was ludicrous and so wrote letters to the superintendent from Thoreau's point of view. We posted the letters on the bulletin board and it was obvious that my students were beginning to understand Thoreau's values and beliefs. My students gobbled up *Woodsong*. They loved it and enjoyed thinking about what Paulsen learned from his dogs and from nature. I asked them to respond to the book by writing about what they thought Paulsen learned from nature, what Thoreau and Paulsen had in common, and what parts of the book had the biggest impact on them.

EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT.

Later I asked the students to write a reflective paper about whether or not they could be a Thoreau in their own time, and in what ways they could connect Thoreau's values or beliefs to their own.

The last project we did in our Thoreau unit evolved from an idea I got from Tom Romano's *Clearing the Way*. I had my students write short stories or plays about Thoreau appearing in our time with his values intact. They were to include what Thoreau would bring with him from his time period and how he would react to the world today. Some students set the plays in the school and had Thoreau enroll as a student. They shared what he said as he went from class to class and how he reacted to the whole school culture. One creative student even had Thoreau fall into Walden Pond and enter into this time period through a locker at our school! This assignment captured the imagination of my students and because they poured so much energy into the project, we ended up with many memorable scripts and stories. On the day the writing was due, students met in small groups in class to share their pieces with each other. Then each group begged to have at least one or two pieces read to the whole-class. We spent the whole next day enacting scripts and reading short stories. To make students aware of how much they had learned about Thoreau and about writing, I had each small group write up a short report on two or three stories or scripts detailing all the ways the writer showed his or her understanding of Thoreau. I also asked them to comment on the aspects of the writing that were especially strong.

This unit ended on a high note because students had so much ownership in their plays and scripts and enjoyed the chance to use the knowledge they had gained in creative ways.

Figure 3.8

Parts of this chapter first appeared in Diana's Teaching Ideas column in the September 1997 *English Journal*. Copyright © 1997 by the National Council of Teachers of English. Reprinted with permission.

◆ EXPLORATIONS

◆ Learn about common goals that have been prescribed for a school or district. Do common skills lists exist? Is there a set of goals that every teacher is expected to cover? How is mastery of these goals measured or monitored? Evaluate the list in terms of your own knowledge and beliefs about the teaching and learning of language. How can you mesh the mandated goals with your own as a teacher?

- ◆ Review the adopted textbooks for a school or district. Read the preface to see what the authors have stated as the aims or goals of the text. Read some of the study questions or exercises to see how those goals are actually put into practice, in fact or by implication. Are there inconsistencies? How well do the goals of the text mesh with your own aims and beliefs? Consider strategies for drawing on the adopted textbook in your own teaching.
- ◆ Make a list for yourself of the potential uses and abuses of the various kinds of units we have described: genre, language, historical/national, thematic/topical. Also list what you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each from a theoretical perspective (i.e., how well the unit style meshes with your understanding of basic principles in English teaching). On the basis of your lists, consider which kinds of unit structures work best for you.
- ◆ Create a list of units that you would like to teach some day. (This is a list that will grow over the years as you teach.) How can your particular areas of interest and expertise be focused for students (without, of course, imposing your own literary hobbyhorses on your students)?
- ◆ Learn about textbook adoption procedures in a school district or your state. How often are books adopted? For what kinds of courses? Who decides which books are chosen? Is there a written policy? Also investigate the ground rules for use of supplemental materials. How free are teachers to supplement the required texts with books of their own choosing?
- ◆ Develop plans for a unit along the lines suggested in this chapter.

RELATED READINGS

The professional literature is surprisingly sparse when it comes to course and unit planning. It is almost as if it is assumed that through experience, teachers will somehow know how to put together a well-organized, coherent plan. The *English Journal* publishes outlines of courses and units from time to time. In addition, the National Council of Teachers of English published a series focusing on the National Standards. Two books in this series provide several examples of full-blown units for secondary teachers. One is *Standards in Practice Grades 6–8* by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and the other is *Standards in Practice Grades 9–12* by Peter Smagorinsky.

Perhaps the best source of ideas for units, however, is fellow teachers. “Idea exchanges” are popular at professional meetings, and conference organizers will frequently invite teachers to bring one hundred or so copies of a unit plan, course design, or teaching idea to share. Join these exchanges to enhance your collection of good unit plans. If such exchanges don’t exist in your area, you might even want to organize one for the school district where you teach.